

22.—Rottnest Island Board

Background

For many years Rottnest had provided a secure place of confinement for native prisoners, but as farming areas developed on the mainland and the country became more settled so the need for such a place grew less urgent. At the same time the Island was used as a desirable place of recreation by the fortunate guests at the Government House shooting parties but no members of the public were allowed to land without permit. A flush of money at the time of the gold rush in the eighteen-nineties enabled the building of several ministerial cottages along the Thompson Bay front.

First mention of the possibility of a wider recreational use seems to have come from the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly after his first taste of island hospitality. In 1905 he urged the development of the Island as a tourist resort. Immediate steps were taken to survey the position, and a most extravagant plan of works emerged. Only strong outside pressure prevented the subdivision and sale of 300 blocks of land on the Island to provide finance for this.

Vice-regal support for a wider use was positive as will be seen from the following extract from a minute dated March 1907, from the office of His Excellency Admiral Sir Frederick Bedford:

- (1) The Island should be declared a Public Park and recreation ground for ever. It is very desirable to avoid the idea getting about that the Island is being exploited for the benefit of the few men, who at this time could afford to buy or rent plots to build.
- (2) That the natural beauty of the Island shall not be disturbed more than is absolutely necessary.
- (3) Better communication with mainland.
- (4) That it should be made more attractive by planting trees and making roads.

Further opposition killed any idea of subdivision, and the government began some small building development in the area of the present barracks. A change of government swung the location of settlement in the opposite direction towards Bathurst, but before much could be done the impact of World War I held up all progress while during a long term stay of prisoners-of-war much was destroyed of what little building had been attempted.

On 12/5/17 the Island was gazetted a Class A Reserve under "The Permanent Reserves Act, 1899," and a Board appointed under the Chairmanship of the Colonial Secretary (Mr. H. Colebatch). As it received no subsidy, the Board immediately found itself in financial difficulty. To this day the Board functions under the same condition and under the same anxiety. In order to arrive at some measure of assistance, the experiment was tried of establishing a new prison camp in the valley between Lakes Herschell and Bagdad, for good conduct prisoners. This however proved unsuccessful and after three years, 1922 saw the departure

of the last prisoners, white and black. (The Boys' Reformatory in the present Hostel had ceased to function in 1901.)

Present Constitution

The Board today functions under the Parks and Reserves Act, and in status is a statutory body free of any departmental authority. With its freedom of function however, it remains free of subsidy so that its very limited resources come from rents, leases and landing fees. One exception is the recent establishment of water catchment area and storage of approximately one and a half million gallons—a project quite beyond the resources of the Board and met by the government of the day.

The Board is presided over by a Minister of the Crown (in 1958, Mr. Kelly—Minister for Lands and Agriculture) and its personnel consists largely of experts in the field of building and architecture, engineering, roadmaking and law.

The duties of the Board embrace:

- (a) The extension of residential facilities.
- (b) The maintenance of existing buildings.
- (c) The maintenance and extension of services—water, sewerage, lighting and power.
- (d) Administrative.
- (e) Beautification of island, particularly in the restoration of trees.
- (f) Development of recreational services.
- (g) Protection of the Island's natural resources.

The Island administration is in the hands of the Managing Secretary, who is resident there.

Biological Aspects

On the one hand the Island presents a wonderful potential for natural life, with its sheltered valleys, its many protected bays, its very large expanse of wide shore reefs and its delightful system of salt lakes. Unhappily on the other hand it is a typical example of the human flair for destruction of natural resources. Decades of bushfire destruction—much of it deliberate to disclose game—have reduced half the Island to bare heath. Present day control in this respect has been offset by protection of the indigenous quokka, which has now increased very greatly in population to the extent that natural regeneration of unprotected vegetation is practically impossible.

The protection of the crayfish from illegal fishing is a major problem with such a long shore line and with settlement so firmly established at one end. At the moment the spear fishermen are suspect of large scale disturbance if not depletion of marine life in the pools and reef areas. The birds appear to be comparatively free from disturbance and the eye of the visitor is delighted with the sight of the many aquatic birds about the lakes. An occasional peacock and the small population of pheasants are descendants of those introduced in the year 1912. There is also a well established population of small land birds.

Re-afforestation

Over the last three decades the Board has been actively engaged in an attempt to restore some of the lost vegetation. The main indigenous trees of the Island include; *Callistris robusta* (Rottnest Pine); *Melaleuca pubescens* (Rottnest Tea Tree); *Acacia rostellifera* (Rottnest Wattle); *Pittosporum phillyraeoides* (Native Pittosporum); *Templetonia retusa* (a shrub).

As early as 1886, a grant of £50 for the establishment of a pine plantation allowed the experimental planting of 500 trees of several types in the Bathurst area. Reports in 1889 indicated an almost complete failure due no doubt to the combined influences of soil deficiencies, wind, drought and the attacks of animals.

There was no revival of effort till 1907 when 200 trees were planted at Mt. Herschell and 600 near Bickley Swamp. Before the onset of summer practically all with the exception of a few aloes were lost. Later still more care and watering developed the magnificent avenue of Moreton and Sydney figs and olives through the settlement and the large pines to be found in the older parts of the settlement.

It rested with the late Dr. W. Somerville to bring to bear the conviction and energy necessary to force successful results.

A disappointing start in 1929 stressed the need for a local nursery. From 1932 onwards the story is one of continual progress. After experimenting with native trees from the mainland, the outstanding result was the discovery of the hardihood and quick growing qualities of the Tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*). Somerville's book "Rottnest Island" from which much of this information was taken, shows photographs of trees planted by Italian prisoners-of-war in 1942. After seven years these trees had reached a height of 55 feet. Between 1934 and 1944 he was responsible for the raising and planting out of 5,000 tuarts in the plantation near the head of Serpentine Lake. At the same time there was developing to the north of the settlement a large plantation for use as a camping area. Altogether during eleven years it was estimated that 41 acres of plantation and 210 chains of line planting had been effected. Planting has continued at the approximate rate of five to six hundred trees per year. The present beautification of the settlement area stands as a memorial to Somerville, who was also largely responsible for the original planning of the beautiful University grounds at Crawley. As an example of the experimentation that went on, the following still exist on the Island, *E. gomphocephala* (Tuart), *Ficus macrophylla* and *F. Australis*, *Araucaria excelsa* (Norfolk Is. Pine), *Agonis flexuosa* (Peppermint), *E. erythrocorys*, *E. meliodora*, *E. camaldulensis*, *E. torquata*, *Casuarina glauca* and *C. stricta* (Sheoaks), *Ceratonia siliqua* (Carob Bean), *Olea europea*, *Melea azedarach* (Cape Lilac), *Pinus halepensis* (Aleppo Pine), *P. pinea*, *P. canariensis* (Canary Island Pine), *Cupressus* sp., *Washingtonia felifera*, *Pheonix canariensis*.

Present Activity

Somerville's phase of activity resulted in the beautification of the settlement. The next stage

of development (now under way) consists of the effort to replace valley groves and to line the main tourist roads with quick growing trees. Line planting along the north road across the lakcs has reached the sealed road and is expected to reach the central light-house next season. In order to re-establish valley groves it is necessary to enclose areas for protection of young trees against the quokka, and in this project there are to date six large fenced areas and a number of small areas all planted with trees. The first two have reached the stage when next season the fences will be removed to fence two fresh areas. Happily, sales of quokkas to overseas zoos have gone a long way towards financing these ventures. In general the policy is to try and preserve the balance between native and exotic, for which reason emphasis in 1958 was given to Tea Tree and special attention in 1959 will be devoted to Rottnest Pine.

As an example of the scale of planting being attempted, this season's planting (1958) is a record planting of 1250 trees, mostly line and plantation. Experimental planting has included, Native Pittosporum (indigenous), *E. lehmanii*, *E. calaphylla*, and palms, unnamed, from U.S.A. With the help of public donations following disastrous fires a few years ago, the nursery has been enlarged and reorganised. Leading from the nursery an avenue of young trees show examples of the types now being used.

Scientific Use of the Island

It is appropriate and very desirable that the unique features of the Island should be available to scientific study and experiment. In 1930 the then State Apiculturist (Mr. W. Lance) established an apiary for the breeding of pure Carniolan Queens, and this is now a well established project.

In more recent years the Biological Committee, representing Fisheries Department, University Department of Zoology, and K. Sheard have found it possible to establish permanent quarters in the centre of the Island. Apart from what help the Board can offer in the matter of labour, there is little that it can do to help such highly specialised bodies. There are however fairly frequent occasions when good turns can be offered from both directions. At all times in both the apicultural and the biological fields, relationships with the Board and Board Management have been excellent. From the beginning the Board was represented at Biological Section meetings. In the early stages, its Chairman attended to represent the Board and in latter times his place has been taken by the Board member most interested in the biological field (Mr. T. Sten). The same relationships exist with the Departments of Agriculture, Forestry and other bodies to whom the Board must turn from time to time for expert advice. It is not to be expected that the full scientific potential has yet been exploited, and it is to be hoped that the Island will be able to make an even greater contribution in this direction in the future.

T. STEN.